

ABROAD AT HOME | Anthony Lewis**By Hate Possessed**

Not for many years has this country known a political atmosphere as vicious as Washington experienced in the days leading up to the House vote on aid to the contras. And it is not over. For a number of reasons, the Nicaraguan issue will continue to poison our politics.

First, we have a President who is obsessed by the subject. The Sandinista Government is his Moby Dick. Like a political Ahab, he pursues it beyond reason, beyond humanity, beyond safety. In his frustration, he spews out rage and hate, fear and falsehood.

When he spoke to the nation a week ago, urging military aid to the contras, his misstatements of fact were so flagrant that they troubled even those inured to Reagan fantasies. He said the Sandinistas were "deeply involved in drug trafficking," but Mr. Reagan's own Drug Enforcement Administration knew of no such thing. He painted Brazil red on a map, though just a week earlier his Assistant Secretary of State for the region had assured Brazil that we saw no Red menace there.

Does Mr. Reagan know such statements are untrue when he utters them? Or does he sincerely believe them in spite of the evidence? But those interesting questions need not be explored for present purposes. In either event, it is the obsession with Nicaragua that drives the President to the extreme.

The obsession, moreover, rests on a broad foundation of ideology. Anti-Communism is a crusade for Ronald Reagan. Hence the question of how to deal with the Sandinistas is one not of practical judgments but of purity and patriotism.

Those premises, psychological as much as political, led so easily to the methods used by the President and

Reagan's Nicaragua obsession

his men in the contra aid debate: the lurid language, the McCarthyite smears, the deliberate attempts to frighten Democrats. The end justifies the means.

The use of fear as a tactic was particularly striking. McCarthyism in its original form was an incoherent cry of frustration by people who had long been denied power. But here an atmosphere of fear, of maps dripping red, was created by an Administration that had been in power for five years.

The paranoid style in American politics, Richard Hofstadter called it. When it appears, it inevitably corrupts political discourse and the decision-making process. The hunt for supposed Communists in the State Department crippled our ability to understand and deal rationally with the new China in the 1950's, at terrible cost to United States interests.

For all those reasons, we can expect the Nicaraguan issue to go on poisoning the atmosphere. But there is another reason, not so much ideological as factual.

In 1969, Henry Kissinger said of Vietnam that it might not have mattered much to the United States originally in terms of geography or resources. But after years of involvement in the war, he said, America had a vital stake in Vietnam: its own credibility.

That same reasoning will be advanced as to Nicaragua, beyond doubt. For here again, the United States has gone in by degrees, starting surreptitiously and building up the commitment to the point where those who made the policy have an independent interest in not being seen to fail.

The Central Intelligence Agency started in 1961 with a modest covert operation. It selected the contras, installed former Somoza officers as their commanders, fixed their objectives, advised them on terrorist methods.

When the operation became public knowledge, Congress objected. But with all the debates since then, the United States commitment to war against the Sandinistas has grown. And there is no reason to think that the involvement is going to end now. To the contrary, the expectation in Washington is that Congress next month will approve an increase in support for the contras, hedged only with some rather meaningless requirements for negotiation.

In those circumstances, President Reagan will surely find failure of the contra war unacceptable. But it is failing. No serious analyst, sympathetic to the contras or not, sees any chance of their winning. The idea that \$100 million in U.S. aid will bring them victory is laughable.

What then? The President is indignant at the idea that he might send U.S. forces into Nicaragua. But if not, and if Nicaragua is so vital, how will he react to failure of the policy? He will intensify the divisive rhetoric and call for more of what has failed.

At least there is one Tip O'Neill with the courage to say what is happening. For the rest, we can only await the painful correction of history. □